

THE ODYSSEY OF OUR BUSHMAN BOY.

By MISS L. CURRLÉ.

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Our old boy's earliest recollections are centred in the town of Graaff-Reinett, C. C. He does not remember his parents or relations—he thinks they were murdered by Kafirs; he was brought up by an "Ou Bass" Hendrick Pretorius, who had a long, white beard, and was of a kindly disposition. This "Ou Bass" had two large erven, and taught the little Bushman—in company with his sons—the cultivation of same, and thus Gert became a good gardener. He remembers that the home and erven were situated towards sunset near the market, and that the "Ou Bass" had slaughter- and baking-houses; he was taught in both trades, and is still, in spite of his great age, the cleanest butcher we ever had on the farm. In his own words "Cornelius Somerset zey was de Commandant van de Kaap" (probably Lord Somerset, who was Governor from 1813-26). The Kafirs were troublesome and warlike. He distinctly remembers soldiers and burghers being called out to meet the advancing King-kop Kafir; he wanted to go out with his young masters, but the "Ou Bass" said he was too young. He says he heard the booming of cannons, and vividly remembers a detachment of the King's Dragoons falling into the enemies' hands, the Kafirs afterwards riding the fine horses. He was taken to the "baai"—no doubt Port Elizabeth—and saw ships with big, fluttering white sails, coming from the sea, and soldiers disembarking. His "Ou Bass," sons, and family joined the big trek to Natal (1833); he says it was a very large trek, consisting of a great number of people, wagons, and oxen; out in the veldt he was taught to handle a gun and shoot game, also to help mind the oxen, out and inspan them, and drive a span or lead it. They used to guard the oxen with loaded guns, in fear of Kafirs and wild beasts; in the evening the wagons were drawn together, guards put out, and when they feared tigers* fires were kept burning all night to

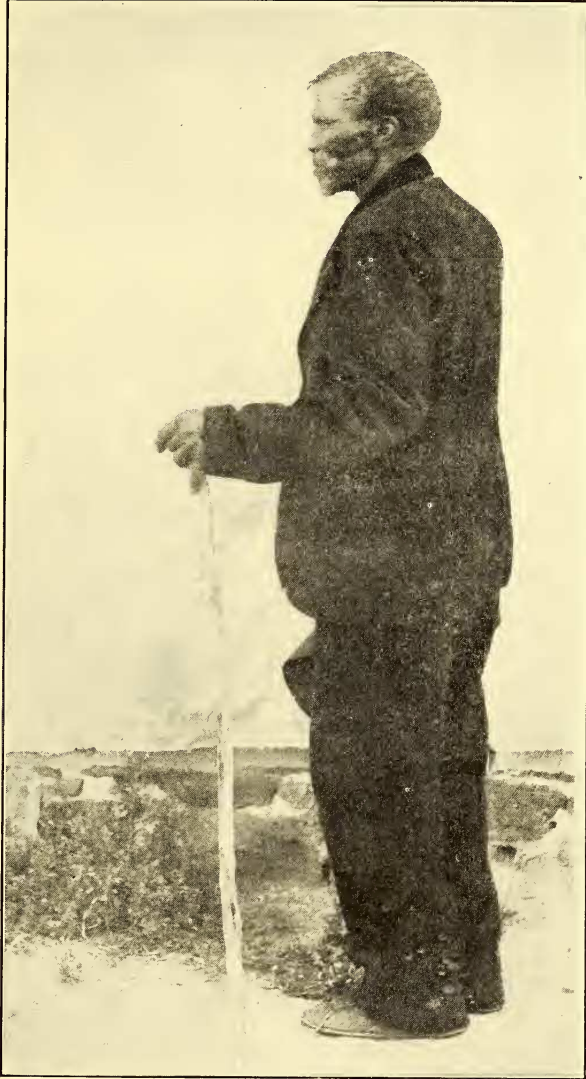
* In South Africa the leopard goes by the name of "tiger."—L.P.

frighten these marauders away. The trek was difficult, he says ; the Kafir were first friendly and then hostile, they were very cruel and barbarous and murdered many of the trekkers ; after moving about here and there,



those of his masters Pretorius who were still living, trekked back. He remembers being in Bloemfontein, but is not certain whether it was at this period or at a later stage that he went with an English hunting

expedition into the Kalahari desert and up to the Zambesi River. These English were "groot, rijk mensche,"—his expression for people of position and wealth; they had finely equipped wagons and barrels of water. Then



they used to chop up and boil the samma melons in the Kalahari, and made coffee from the juice which ran out of the flesh of the melons through the action of the fire. He knows all the edible wild plants and roots, and tells

us the *Stapelia* was greatly valued by the Bushmen when thirsty, as it would kill great thirst. The expedition shot a lot of big game; he has seen crocodiles,* *lakavanes*, *haarte-beest*, *blaau-wilde beest*, *eland*s, giraffes, zebras, tigers, lions, leopards, wolves, jackals, wild-dogs, and all kinds of wild buck and small game; he certainly can describe all the spoors† most minutely, and could track them exceptionally well in his younger days; this quality seems to be inherent in the Bushman people, no doubt through long generations of them being engaged in tracking the spoors of game and wild animals. They are also very good herds for all kinds of stock; our old boy will often scold animals roundly, as if he fully expected that they would fully understand his tirades, but always handles them gently, excepting when he is very angry, when a gleam of the latent fierceness of the Bushman will kindle like a flame.

He knows a large variety of fish; and seems to know a great deal about snakes, lizards, scorpions, and poisonous creatures generally.

He remembers the terrible drought when the waters of the Orange River ceased to flow, the waters in the deep pools soon became stagnant, as hundreds of Boer families had taken refuge on the banks, and stood in wagons and tents, their thousands of small stock, cattle, and horses helping to pollute the pools.

Then he wandered to Riet River and worked for "Ou Bass" Zwartz, whose wife eventually died from cancer; old Gert believed to this day that as soon as she died all the bees left, and they could not get any swarms to settle there again. (No doubt a Bushman superstition firmly engraved upon his memory.)

Finally he had to drive some oxen to Jacobsdaal; he was mounted on a fine black horse, when, crossing a drift, he saw a Griqua woman washing clothes. Some of the foremost oxen sniffed the clothes and walked in their direction, where they were drying on some bushes. The woman stood watching, with her hands resting on her enormous hips; it was a critical moment—and old Gert recognised this when he saw how fat and light yellow in colour she was. He sjambokked his horse out of the water and turned the oxen off in the nick of time. Then he greeted the woman. Well, after some conversation, he inquired where she lived, and upon hearing that she was a widow and worked at Mr. John Fraser's, the store-keeper, he decided to seek employment there, as he felt tired of working for "Ou Baas" Zwartz. He took the Griqua woman for a wife; he thought her remarkably fine-looking when she waddled like a duck. Her daughter was Mrs. Fraser's nursemaid. They were in service in this family for many years, and when Mr. Fraser started farming near Hope Town they

* A corruption of the word *P'iguane*, which applies here to the Nile Monitor and another species.—L.P.

† Footprints.—L.P.

went with him, also to Van Hoek, near Modder River, having a considerable number of small stock of their own. When the daughter came of age, as it is customary with the Griqua race, a Gaastmaal (a feast) was given to which all the surrounding Grikwas had been invited. After a few days' duration the feast was over—not a single sheep or goat were left! They had given their best and their all to their guests. After unaccountable disappearance of some of Mr. Fraser's sheep, Gert and Lena sought other employment; they went to Bloemfontein; their daughter and her young husband quietly left them on the market-place, and have never been heard of again. Her daughter was a good girl, and no doubt felt disgusted about her old master's sheep being made away with.

After a vain search they returned to Modder River, hoping the girl had returned; old Gert was caught doing with some sheep that which he should not have done, and consequently was confined in the Kimberley gaol. Then they entered into the service of Mr. and Mrs. Currlé in 1887.

The old couple were possessed of some goats, some good karrosses, a gun, and two dogs. I was a child then, but can distinctly remember "Oude" Gert, the old and small, keen-eyed and active Bushman, light yellow in colour, having oval-shaped eyes with a quick and shifty glance which seldom looked one straight in the eyes, a flat nose, and prominent cheek-bones. His hair all seemed hundreds of wee, stiff curls, black, but not glossy-looking, it looked dull and greasy; he had a scanty little beard, which now, in 1907, is tinged with white. He could look exceedingly pleasant and harmless, but we found out that he was not altogether trustworthy and reliable, and could easily be influenced for either good or evil.

In 1891 we sold the greater part of our flock and bought a farm—Klipfontein, near Blink-kop (now Postmasburg) district Hay, Griqualand West—to which we soon moved. Old Gert was deeply ashamed to be seen with the remnant of our flock, and tried to hide away from the gaze of strangers by keeping them away from the roads—surely a sign of interest in our affairs! However, the old Bushman nature had to come forth from time to time, and in spite of receiving an ample allowance of food, he had to do something wrong and to take advantage of circumstances, and kill and eat a fat lamb, or even hamel, or take out honey, &c. From time to time the old people would sell a lot of their stock to a travelling hawker and buy all kinds of things, presenting their fellow-servants with gifts, and smoking so much tobacco and drinking such a quantity of coffee that they generally became ill.

Gradually the old girl sickened and became weak-minded; she even stopped telling the harrowing tragedies relating to the Kafir wars. Her one mania was to light a fire.

The old girl died. The other Griqua boy we had dug the grave, with a crypt in the wall towards the sunset, in which the remains were laid.

I read the burial service. When the grave was filled we withdrew. Old Gert felt crushed and restless; eventually he took a hatchet and chopped a lot of thorny shrubs and covered the grave with them. He believes the grave to be haunted and never goes to it.

He married a Bechuana girl later and lived with her for some months, then returned to us half-starved; she had spent all his stock—such a nice little flock—and he returned a sadder, if not a wiser man.

Old Gert is servile in disposition, fluctuates between grateful and revengeful moods in his old age; and thus a chequered career is slowly drawing to a conclusion.